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COMMON GOAL

RACHEL REID



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Chapter One

“I’m going to be thinking about that all night,” Eric Bennett confessed. “Should’ve had that one.”

His goal posts, as always, didn’t reply.

Eric grabbed his bottle off the top of the net, then squirted some water into his mouth before glancing up at the scoreboard screen, where they were showing the goal that had just sailed past him. It looked even worse in slow motion.

“We’ll get the next one, right, guys?” Eric tapped each of the goal posts with his stick, then shook out his shoulders. It was now 3-1 for the opposing team and still only the first period. This game was a disaster. Eric could imagine what the commentators were saying on television about him right now. That Eric Bennett couldn’t keep up with the pace of the NHL these days. That he was past his prime, and ready for retirement.

Fuck them. They’d been saying that about Eric for almost ten years now. Every time he had an off game, or a minor injury, it was time to put him out to pasture. As if Eric hadn’t had off games when he’d been twenty-six and winning every goaltending award. As if he hadn’t, at the tender age of thirty-eight, played a major part in winning the Stanley Cup with the New York Admirals three seasons ago.

The Admirals' captain, Scott Hunter, skated up to him and tapped his pads. "Tough one, Benny. You good?"

"I'm good. I'm shutting the door now. Think you've got a couple of goals in you?"

"Absolutely."

Eric crouched forward, ready for play to resume. "Nothing else is getting past me tonight," he promised himself.

The promise lasted exactly one minute and forty-three seconds. That was when Shane Hollander, the stupid goddamned superstar forward for Montreal, fired a textbook perfect shot that flew over Eric's left shoulder.

Fuck.

Eric glanced at the bench and was not at all surprised to see Coach Murdock gesturing at him to come to the bench. He could also see New York's other goaltender, Tommy Anderson, putting on his mask.

Fuck!

"Sorry, guys," Eric told his posts. "I guess I'm watching the rest of this one. Be nice to Tommy."

He skated toward the bench with his head down. He could hear the crowd's weak applause, which was maybe a showing of support for Eric, or maybe relief that he was being replaced.

Tommy tapped Eric's pads as he passed him. "Don't worry about it, Benny."

Eric didn't reply, because of course he was going to worry about it. Not just this game, but the whole rest of this season.

Which could very well be the whole rest of Eric's career. Eric's teammates greeted him with cautious words of support as he plopped down on the bench. He hauled his mask off and gave it to the equipment manager, who handed Eric an Admirals ball cap to wear instead. Eric hated wearing ball caps. They looked weird on his head.

Play resumed, and Tommy, barely warmed up, had to stop two quick shots. He stopped both, which earned him a roar

of approval from the crowd. Tommy was a good goalie. Too good to be Eric's backup, and everyone knew it. Eric was sure Tommy had only stuck with the Admirals this long because he was waiting for Eric to retire. Maybe this entire team was waiting for Eric to retire.

His wife hadn't waited.

Eric frowned. It wasn't a fair thing to say or even think. Holly had had plenty of reasons for ending their marriage, and he understood all of them. He had known for years that their marriage hadn't been working; the spark that had been there in their youth had died a long time ago. Eric had told himself that his schedule was to blame, and that he and Holly would have a chance to fall back in love once he retired. Maybe she had hoped for that too for a while, but the truth they both eventually acknowledged was that they probably never were going to fall back in love. Their best years as a couple were behind them, and it was time to move on. Eric knew their divorce was the best thing for them both. Knowing it didn't make him feel any less lonely, though.

His teammates didn't talk to him much for the rest of the game, even during the intermissions in the locker room. They knew he preferred to be left alone for now. Tommy played a hell of a game, stopping all but one of Montreal's shots on goal, but the Admirals still lost by two goals in the end.

Long after the game had ended, and after Coach Murdock had talked to the team—which included praising Tommy for his efforts—Eric was sitting in his stall wearing half of his navy Ted Baker suit. The shirt collar was unbuttoned, and his tie hung loose and open around his bent neck. He absently rotated his wedding ring, which he couldn't quite bring himself to stop wearing.

"Hey."

Eric didn't need to raise his head to know that Scott Hunter had sat himself next to him. "Hi."

"You doing okay? I mean, besides the game tonight. Anything bothering you?"

Nope. *Being freshly divorced and staring down the barrel of my forty-first birthday is awesome.* "No. Just an off game."

Scott clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll be back on top in the next game."

Eric nodded. He would make sure of it.

"You're coming tomorrow night, right?" Scott asked.

As much as Eric did not feel like going to an engagement party for Scott and his fiancé, Kip, he forced a smile and said, "Definitely. Of course. Can't wait."

Scott beamed at him. Scott had been doing a lot of smiling in the past couple of years since he'd fallen in love with Kip Grady. It had been a lonely, closeted life for Scott before he'd decided to risk it all for a chance at happiness with the man he'd met in a smoothie shop. Eric was one of the first people that Scott had come out to, and Eric didn't take that lightly. He was thrilled for Scott, even if the institution of marriage hadn't been Eric's favorite thing lately.

"Good," Scott said, still smiling. "Let's put this game behind us, all right? And we'll all have fun tomorrow night."

Eric gave him a wry smile. "Even me?"

Scott laughed. "Even you, Benny. I'll make sure of it."

Kyle Swift glanced across the table for the millionth time that morning. He couldn't help it. These study dates with Kip were always completely unproductive for him. He spent far more time studying Kip's face than his own notes.

Kip was engrossed in something on his laptop, his hazel eyes darting back and forth as he read. He had dark stubble on his cheeks and jaw today, which Kyle liked, even though it made Kip's dimples less noticeable. And, oof. Kyle had spent too much of the past couple of years contemplating those dimples.

Kip's face turned up, and Kyle quickly dropped his gaze to his own laptop screen.

Kyle wasn't sure why he tortured himself like this. Just because he and Kip were both working on their MA degrees in history didn't mean they needed to have these ridiculous study dates. They weren't even going to the same university. Kyle would spend most of their first hour together stealing glances at Kip, and then Kip would get bored and start asking Kyle questions that had nothing to do with their academic pursuits. It was the conversations that always did Kyle in. The easy way they talked to each other and laughed together, because they had so many things in common. Because Kip was funny and warm and a total sweetheart. Because he was absolutely perfect for Kyle in all the ways the men Kyle usually dated weren't.

Too bad Kip was engaged.

"Kyle?"

Kyle glanced up and was attacked by one of Kip's cute, dimply smiles.

"Hey, there you are. I'm going to get a refill." Kip waved his empty coffee mug in the air. "You want one?"

"Actually," Kyle said slowly, "I need to get going."

"Oh." Kip frowned.

"But I'll see you at the party tonight."

Kip's smile returned. "I can't believe I'm engaged!"

"I don't know what you see in that guy," Kyle said dryly.

Kip sighed dramatically. "I know. But a man reaches a certain age, sometimes he has to settle, y'know?"

"Twenty-eight. Is that the age you mean?"

"I don't want to be a spinster."

"It's kind of you to marry that gorgeous millionaire athlete."

"I know," Kip said solemnly. "I'm very brave."

They both laughed, and Kyle did his best to ignore the ache in his heart.

"Maybe you'll meet *your* future husband tonight," Kip suggested playfully.

"Uh-huh. I'll see you later." Kyle shoved his laptop into his backpack and slung the bag over his shoulder.

"Your dream man might be there! Keep an open mind."

My dream man will definitely be there. That's kind of the problem. Which, of course, Kyle did not say. Instead he said, "I'll wear something nice just in case."

"You always look nice."

Kyle's heart clenched. "Don't make Scott jealous."

Kip snorted like that was the most absurd idea in the world. Kyle supposed it was. Anyone—Scott included—could see that Kip only had eyes for his husband-to-be.

Kyle flipped the hood of his sweatshirt up to protect his hair and glasses from the drizzle outside. He supposed he could use the party tonight as inspiration to finally, and firmly, close the door on this pointless crush on Kip Grady. Kyle had volunteered to work the bar tonight, mostly because it would give him something to do other than listen to his heart shrivel and die while Kip and Scott smooshed their perfect faces together.

This would be it, Kyle decided as he hurried down the stairs to the subway. Tonight he would stop pining for Kip and maybe have fun making straight hockey players uncomfortable by flirting with them. And then he would focus his efforts on finding a nice, available, and, most importantly, *appropriate* man to live happily ever after with.

Or a cute guy with a tight ass. Whichever.

Chapter Two

Kyle had never been so disappointed by a gay bar full of hot men.

He had spent a lot of time in gay bars. A lot of time in *this* bar in particular. The Kingfisher had been his main source of income for years, and he'd flirted with a vast array of hot men in this very room during that time. He'd gone home with a decent percentage of them. Tonight the Kingfisher was celebrating the engagement of two gay men, yet was packed with straight dudes. Hockey players, mostly.

Extremely attractive hockey players. And their wives.

Water, water everywhere...

Kyle sighed and poured a lager for the zillionth time that evening. The hockey players were not adventurous in their choice of alcoholic beverages. He set the pint glass on the bar and offered a smile to the tall, scruffy millionaire athlete who took the beer without even a glance at Kyle.

Straight men. God.

There was a time when meeting even one NHL star would have been exciting, but since Scott Hunter had become a regular at the Kingfisher, and since Kyle had become friends with Kip, New York Admirals players had become commonplace in Kyle's life. Boring, even.

“Having fun?” Kyle’s co-worker, Aram, playfully bumped his hip as he reached for a pint glass.

“Could be having more fun if any of these boys knew how to flirt,” Kyle grumbled.

“I know. What a waste, right? This place is full of tens, and they’re all worthless.”

“Counterfeit tens,” Kyle agreed.

Aram rested both of his massive arms on the bar and leaned forward, grinning at the rowdy and attractive crowd. “Still, though. Fun to look at. Have you *seen* Matti Jalo up close?”

“Not as close as I’d like to.”

Aram laughed as a man who was *not* the New York Admirals’ gorgeous Finnish defenseman ambled up to the bar and asked them for a couple of pints of beer. Aram got to work pouring them while pointlessly flirting with the man. Kyle let his eyes roam the room.

Ooh. Eric Bennett.

The Admirals’ star goaltender was leaning against the bar, seemingly taking in the party. Kyle didn’t really know him, but he’d seen him in here before with Scott and Kip and he was kind of exactly Kyle’s type. Or, rather, he was exactly the type of man Kyle wouldn’t allow himself to fall for anymore. But it didn’t hurt to *look*. Kyle had always loved Eric’s dark, curly hair and well-groomed stubble, both of which were flecked with gray. He was tall and lean and always seemed so mature and elegant compared to the other Admirals players.

Eric was alone now, and he was *technically* at the bar, so Kyle could *technically* ask if he wanted to order anything. What if he’d been waiting patiently this whole time to order a drink? With his back to the bar...

“Can I get you anything?” Kyle leaned on the bar, angling his face so that Eric could see him in his periphery.

Eric turned his head immediately. “I’m fine,” he said with a polite smile.

He certainly was. He was wearing a blue-and-white checked shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal his strong forearms. His dark eyes fixed on Kyle’s, his gaze confident and unwavering.

Oof. If Kyle had one weakness—and he didn’t; he had many—it was confident, attractive older men. Also, confident, attractive younger men. Also, men.

“Kyle, right?” Eric asked. “You’re friends with Kip.”

“That’s me.”

“I’m Eric.” He extended his hand, and Kyle shook it.

“I know who you are.” Kyle’s tone was teasing and flirty, because it was pretty much always teasing and flirty. “You’re the one who hides that handsome face behind a mask all the time.”

He expected Eric the heterosexual goaltender to lean away and make an excuse to leave. Or maybe just leave. But instead, his lips quirked up and he said, “That’s how it stays so handsome.”

Kyle let himself enjoy the playful sparkle in Eric’s eyes for a moment.

“Hey, Kyle! I need to get a fresh keg of the lager. You good here for a minute?”

Kyle turned to Aram. “Of course. Go use those muscles.”

Aram blew him a kiss, then left for the back room.

“It was nice of Scott to book this party at Kip’s place of work,” Eric said dryly.

Kyle laughed. “I was thinking the exact same thing. Who does that, right?”

Eric shook his head. “Scott Hunter, that’s who. He likes this place, and he’s comfortable here. I’m sure that’s all he was focused on.”

Kyle spotted Scott in the crowd—it wasn’t hard because he was six-four and looked exactly how Kyle had always imagined Achilles. Scott was laughing with some friends, and Kyle couldn’t help but smile. Two years ago, Scott had been firmly in the closet, lonely, and would have been terrified to enter a

gay bar like the Kingfisher. Now he was a regular here—the bar had even named a drink after him—and hosting his big gay engagement party. Kyle was happy for him. He was happy for Kip too, even if his feelings on that front were a little more complicated.

“Are you sure I can’t get you anything?” Kyle asked. “I’ve been pouring pints all night and I would love to show off my cocktail skills.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Oh. Oh god, sorry. I shouldn’t tempt you.”

Eric waved a hand. “It’s not like that. I’m not tempted.”

“Ah.” Kyle folded his arms on the bar and leaned forward.

“You’re just a very good boy, then?”

Eric smirked. “Most of the time.”

Wait. *Was* Eric flirting with him? The conversation seemed flirtatious, but Kyle had a long history of clocking desire when there absolutely was none on the part of the other man.

Straight men. Another weakness of his.

“You’re in luck because I happen to make the most amazing mocktails in the world.”

Amusement sparkled in Eric’s eyes. “Do you now?”

Kyle winked. “You’ll swear there’s booze in them. They’re that good.”

“I can’t really compare.”

“Has it really been that long since you’ve had a drink?”

Before Eric could answer—if he was going to answer—they were interrupted by an excited Kip Grady.

“Eric!” Kip draped an arm over Eric’s shoulders, then drunkenly lurched forward, pulling both men closer to where Kyle was standing behind the bar. Eric’s nose almost brushed Kyle’s cheek. “You’re here!”

“I am,” Eric said, calmly sliding out from under Kip’s arm. He straightened and took a step back, but his face was still relaxed and quietly amused. “Are you having a good time?”

“I’m getting married!” Kip’s cheeks were flushed, and his eyes glowed with drunken ecstasy and love. Kyle looked away.

“Congratulations,” Eric said. He leaned on the bar, then brought his left hand up to clasp his wrist. That’s when Kyle noticed the gold band on his ring finger.

Married. Right. Of course.

He blinked when he realized that Kip was trying to get his attention. He dragged his gaze away from the wedding ring and up to Kip’s beaming face.

“This is Eric!” Kip said sloppily. “He’s, like, the best goalie ever!”

“I’ve heard.”

“He’s smart too! He collects art.” Kip’s eyes widened in an expression of sudden realization. “Eric! Kyle is *studying art!*”

“Really?” Eric asked Kyle.

“Art *history*,” Kyle clarified. “Ancient art, mostly. If your collection includes three-thousand-year-old mosaics, I’m your expert.”

Eric’s face split into a wide smile that nearly knocked Kyle on his ass. This man was *gorgeous*.

While Kyle was losing himself in Eric’s handsome face, Kip darted behind the bar, bumping up against Kyle. He grabbed a pint glass and started pouring himself a beer, but Kyle stopped him. “Get out of here. You’re drunk.”

Kip rolled his eyes dramatically. “Fine. You pour it.”

When Kyle handed him the beer that he absolutely did not need, Kip leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Love you.”

Kyle’s shoulders stiffened. “Love you too,” he said quietly. His gaze followed Kip helplessly as he walked away with his drink.

“Where are you studying ancient art?” Eric asked, snapping Kyle’s attention back to him.

Kyle managed a small smile. *See, Kyle? There’s no reason to be sad. You have a beautiful, married straight man to keep you company.* “Columbia. I’m working on my master’s degree.”